

Climate change is transforming Australia's cultural life—so why isn't it mentioned in the new national cultural policy?

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In its new national cultural policy, the Australian government grapples with issues extending well beyond the creative arts.

The policy document places issues like First Nations representation, work and wages, technological upheaval, discrimination and sexual harassment front and center.

This [holistic approach](#) has been welcomed and takes important forward steps in many areas.

But it is silent on one key issue.

After winning the climate election, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese promised a "new era" of Australian leadership on the issue.

So where is climate change in the new national cultural policy?

Floods and fires

Nowhere in the arts has the [impact of climate change](#) been more pronounced than music festivals.

Perhaps the most famous example is last year's "Splendor in the Mud". After two years lost to COVID-19, Splendor in the Grass 2022 symbolized the triumphant return of festivals to our cultural calendar. But the first day of the event [was canceled](#) as the site was inundated by an unusually heavy downpour that overwhelmed bad weather preparation on the site.

We have counted more than a dozen music festivals around the country postponed or canceled due to last year's record floods. These include [Yours and Owls](#) in Wollongong, [Strawberry Fields](#) in Tocumwal, and [The Grass is Greener](#) in Canberra and Geelong.

This follows the summer [festival](#) season immediately before the pandemic, which coincided with the Black Summer fires. Festivals such

as [Falls and Day on the Green](#) in Victoria and [Lost Paradise](#) in New South Wales were canceled due to threats from fire or hazardous smoke.

Cancellations and postponements have knock-on effects. Festivals provide [tourism and economic benefits](#) to the areas where they are held. Big festivals [boost](#) the Australian music ecosystem by providing jobs, opportunities for local acts to reach new audiences and opportunities for these audiences to see global touring acts that may otherwise be put off by the logistics of touring a large country with few significant population centers.

When festivals are canceled, especially at short notice, organizers, artists, suppliers, production companies, local communities and punters all pay a price. When cancellations start to become common, the viability of festivals comes into question.

Climate scientists tell us the events that led to recent festival cancellations—not just the fires and floods, but also [the pandemic](#)—are likely to become more frequent and more extreme because of climate change.

In addition to this, increasing heat will make the summer festivals that are currently the norm more and more dangerous.

The music festival in the form we have become accustomed to in this country is undoubtedly at risk.

Mitigation and adaptation

Arts organizations are reacting to the climate crisis. Responses to climate change can be divided into mitigation (trying to reduce impacts, mainly by cutting emissions) and adaptation (finding ways to cope with the changing circumstances).

Festivals such as [Womadelaide](#) and [Woodford Folk Festival](#) have employed mitigation strategies like waste reduction, renewable energy and using local produce. Other artforms, such as [visual art](#) and [theater](#), are also looking at how they can mitigate the effects of climate change.

When it comes to adaptation, we are likely to see [music festivals](#) in the future changing their date and location to avoid risks such as the heat of midsummer or bushfire-prone areas. Significant work would need to be done to understand the flow-on effects of such decisions.

Other solutions may involve fundamentally rethinking what a festival looks like in Australia—including a turn from destination mega-events to something more local—an approach that would require a high level of risk by festival operators in an already risky area.

In the meantime, we are likely to see more festivals canceled or disrupted due to climate change. Aware of this, submissions to the Cultural Policy Review that informed the new Revive policy called for [an interruption or insurance fund](#), like that put in place for COVID-19 related cancelations in the film and television industries.

Any form of insurance failed to make an appearance in the final policy document.

Taking on the challenge

A document like Revive would ideally incorporate considerations of what mitigation and adaptation might look like for all areas in the arts, and provide resources to assist equipping the sector to take on the challenges of [climate change](#).

Revive notes the importance of making creative careers sustainable. It places great emphasis on ensuring cultural ventures adhere to workplace

and employment standards. Incorporating considerations of environmental standards to ensure the sustainability and health of the sector and the careers of those within it would be an important further step.

The climate crisis will necessitate change to business-as-usual approaches to the arts.

We will increasingly see the development of new ways of approaching events and creative work to mitigate their environmental impact and make events, arts organizations and artists more resilient in the face of [climate](#) impacts.

Revive, while breaking important new ground in many respects, has missed an opportunity to lead this crucial work.

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